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Norwich Community Expresses Concern About Code Enforcement And Safety

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Several Norwich community members expressed concern about the lack of code enforcement and safety at the City of Norwich Common Council meeting on June 18. (Photo by Sarah Genter)

NORWICH – At the June 18 City of Norwich Common Council meeting, several city residents members discussed issues they have witnessed within the community.

Individuals came to the podium during the public comment portion of the meeting and shared their experiences. First was Christine Carnrike, the former mayor of Norwich from 2016 to 2019. Carnrike called attention to code enforcement issues she has witnessed. She initially expressed her concerns at a common council meeting in January and said that the five months of inaction since then had been "quite unsettling."

Carnrike mentioned an upcoming opening in a position with no succession plan that the public is aware of, noting a "lack of transparency" with the process.

"My belief is that these small issues become big issues very quickly, and if one doesn't perform the duties of the job with the small matters, are they really doing their job with the larger ones?" Carnrike said.

Carnrike suggested to rectify these issues, the city should work with an experienced and unbiased code inspector, properly advertise job openings for city positions and work with other municipalities.

"It's about dedication and a willingness to serve Norwich to make it a place to live, not a place to leave. To make downtown a place for gathering with family and friends, for meals, drinks, shopping, exercise, entertainment, not a place where folks are afraid to walk, or businesses have to cut their hours for their own staff and their own customer's safety. And most importantly, to make Norwich a place where we can preserve our history and a place to grow and prosper for future generations," Carnrike said to the council.

Carnrike concluded by saying she has contacted the New York State Division of Building Standards and Codes Oversight Unit to help fix the code violations she has witnessed in the city.

At the beginning of the meeting, Norwich Police Chief Reuben Roach said that the police department is understaffed. There are currently only one to two officers available for patrol. Resident Missy Hayes questioned why city officials have not sat down with Roach to discuss the staffing issues.

Hayes said she spoke to Roach, who said the council could approve putting a civilian at the police department's front desk so that the sergeant could patrol the streets to make them safer.

Reiterating a point she made at an April common council meeting, Hayes said the city should transition to a council-manager form of government, where a city manager is appointed as the administrative manager of the city. They would work with the common council and the mayor to create and enforce laws, draft budgets, provide city services, and appoint department heads and directors.

Hayes believes the council-manager government would make the city safer, as it would relieve the mayor of the whole burden of managing the city. She said she has seen many areas for improvement around the city.

"We're dealing with a smaller population, fewer businesses, fewer organizations, fewer high-paying jobs, homelessness – and related safety issues — more open jobs than skilled workers, high taxes, and fewer property owners to carry the burden, a tax system that has not completed a full reassessment since 1988, which translates to some taxpayers paying more than their fair share, and also can deter investors from buying and developing in our city," Hayes said.

Another city resident and business owner on South Broad Street, spoke about issues she has witnessed in the parks and child-friendly places in Norwich. She resides near Bruchhausen Park and said she has had to call the police three separate times due to drug-related issues in the park. She also walks her dog through the park to pick up trash and needles.

The resident called the police on June 4 to report "two individuals smoking crack on a park bench while 15 feet away, there were children swinging on swings with their parents nearby." She said the police did a drive-by but did not ask the individuals to leave.

"If you walk by almost any park after hours, there are drug dealers doing deals, especially Bruchhausen Park, between the hours of 9 p.m. and midnight," she said.

She cited City Ordinance 376-1, which states, "trespassers are to be dealt with, particularly after dusk in community parks and 10 P.M. at East and West Parks."

The resident also expressed concern about the safety of the sidewalks, the lack of trees on the streets and electric bikes. She said she witnessed people biking with no lights dressed in all black after dusk, and people have nearly gotten hit multiple times.

Savannah Collins, owner of Kozmo's restaurant, also spoke about safety issues. Kozmo's, which stood at 23 North Broad Street, permanently closed on June 14. Collins attributed the closure to "extreme stress that adversely affected [her] health, combined with the overhead costs and staffing challenges when transitioning to daytime hours made it difficult to generate sufficient revenue to sustain the business."

Collins also said she found it challenging to manage her business on North Broad Street among incidents that "deterred customers and jeopardized the safety of herself and staff."

Collins said that businesses in the city are forced to make decisions based on whether the surrounding area is safe enough to operate in. She suggested a council-manager government could relieve the mayor's pressure and work to resolve the safety issues she and others have witnessed.